Theory of Change Guide
No. 2 : Impact

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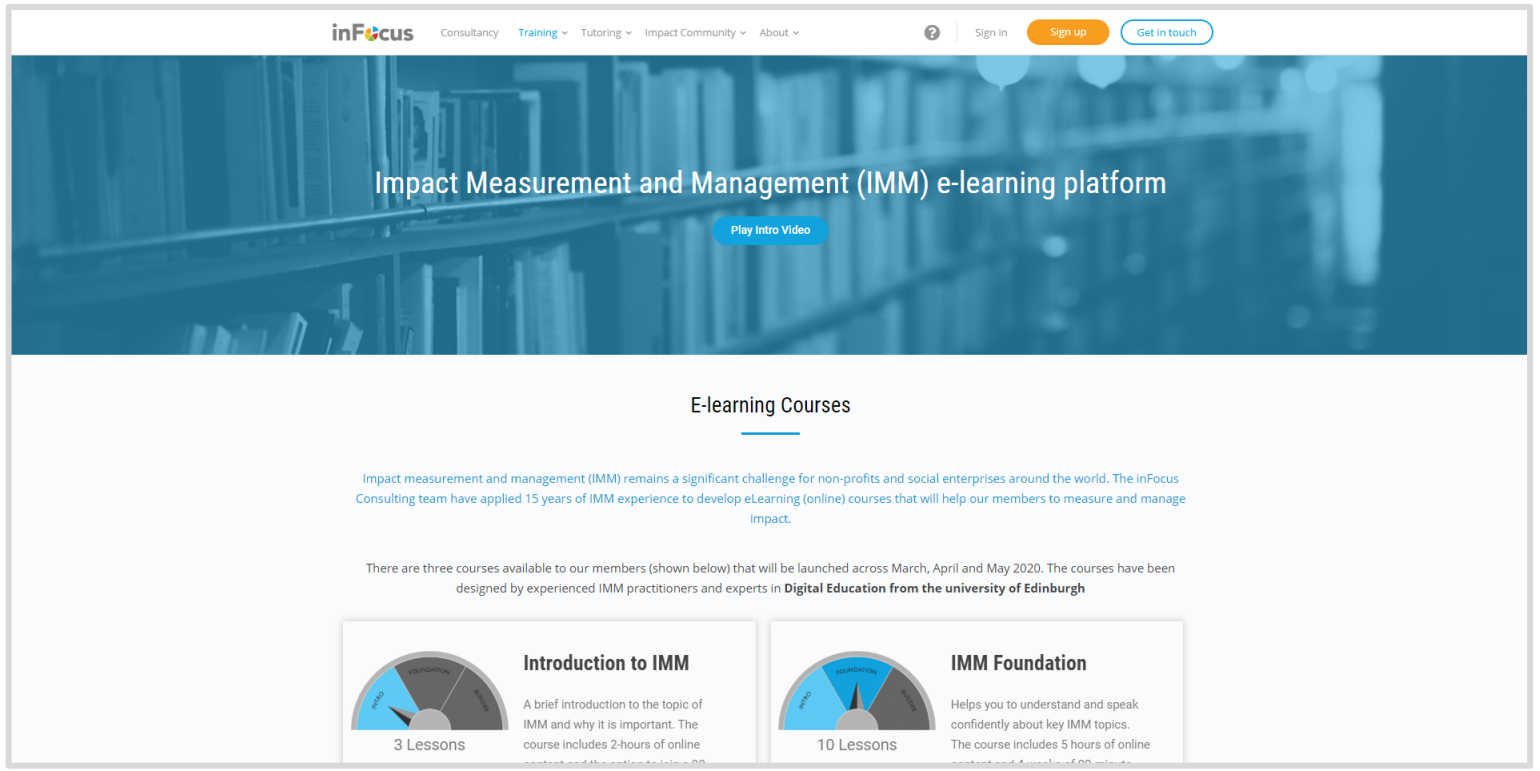
Introduction

This guide forms part of the inFocus Impact Measurement and Management (IMM) eLearning course (https://impactinfocus.com/e-learning/). This is one of a series of five guides that each look at how to develop each section of a theory of change.



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When to develop the 'Impact'

One of the distinguishing features of the theory of change approach is that it incorporates the ***backwards mapping*** technique that we explore later in the outcomes section. This involves defining the impact, the longest-term social or environmental change, first and then working backwards through the changes needed to generate the impact.

1. Situation

Problem

The social or environmental problem or challenge that the organisation is seeking to address

Target Audience

The target audience that will be directly supported by the organisation's services or products

Stakeholders

The stakeholders that can influence the problem positively, or negatively

3. Outcomes pathway

Outcomes are the changes needed from the organisation and in the wider system for the impact to take place. These are often called preconditions, as they relate to the conditions required for the outcomes or impact to occur.

2. Impact

Impact refers to the longest-term social or environmental change that your service or product contributes to in your local and wider social context.

4. Activities and Inputs

The specific activities that are directed towards bringing about outcomes and impact through a service or product. This could also include activities of partner organisations. These are mapped against the outcomes or outcomes pathway to identify any missing outcomes and the extent to which organisations are contributing to impact.

5. Assumptions

Assumptions explore existing beliefs about how the theory of change works.

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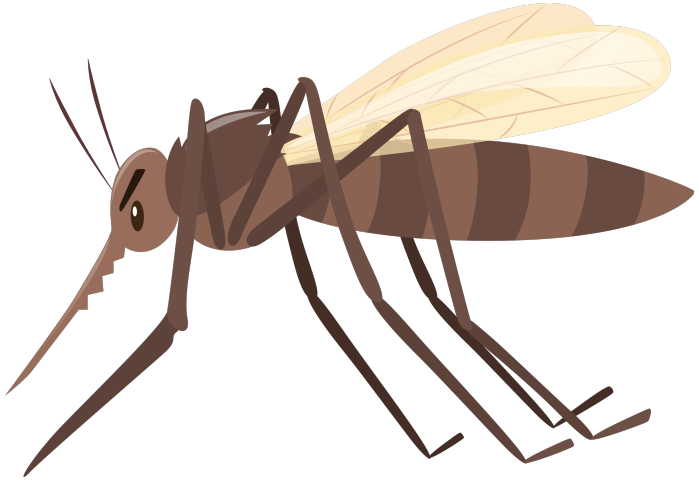
What is 'Impact'

Defining the Target Audience and Stakeholders

Impact refers to the longest-term social or environmental change that your service or product *contribute to* in your local and wider social context, it is unlikely you will be able to achieve this impact alone. Defining the impact sets the overall direction of your theory of change, for this reason it is important to establish clear parameters and avoid generalisations or abstractions when defining your impact.



"If you think you are too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito"

Anita Roddick

The impact can be established within the parameters of the timescale, falling between the extremes of short and long term change…

Shorter-term impact (e.g. 5-10 years)

Longer-term impact (e.g. 50 years)

…and the scope, between the impact on a specific target audience and the impact on the wider environment/society

Focus on the impact for your target audience

Focus on impact for the wider environment/society.

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Why identify the 'impact'

Why identify the 'Impact'?

Defining your overall impact can help in a number of ways:

- Set the **overall direction** of your theory of change
- Gives your theory of change a **focal point** for backwards mapping and identifying outcomes
- Provide **clarity** as to what your organisation will do to address the social problem
- Helps to reach **organisational consensus** regarding the priority impact(s)

For example, members of an organisation might have similar, but differing views of what the impact should be:

"We help young adults to build skills and experience to enter into meaningful employment.

"Our young people grow in personal and professional skills and are able to set and reach their immediate and long-term goals for employment"

"Young people from the community gain access to new opportunities and widen their employment perspectives, breaking the cycle of formal unemployment"

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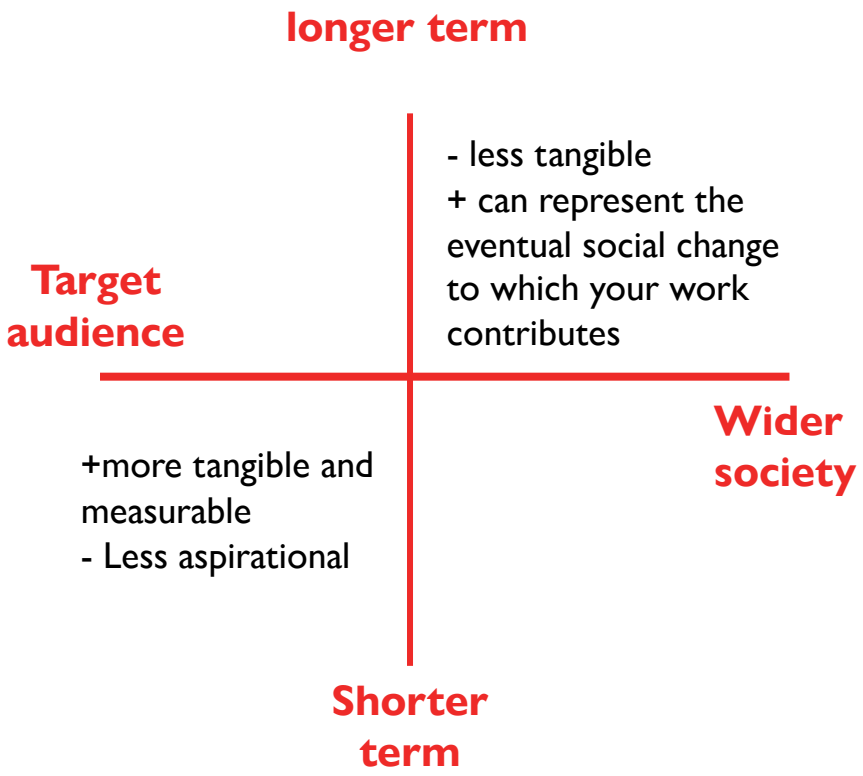
How to define the impact.

Defining the impact

Working with a group of stakeholders (internal and/or external) to develop your impact can be a rewarding process that gets consensus on the overall direction. If working on a theory of change as a group at inFocus we ask participants to work as a group or in pairs to come up with their definition of impact, before bringing the different impact definitions together and finding consensus on one or more impact statements.

The choice of scope and timing comes down to what is most appropriate to your organisation. Focusing on the shorter-term impacts for participants and the immediate community can provide a more tangible, measurable goal for the organisation.

Focusing on the wider impact in society or the environment is potentially less tangible. However, this can be more inspirational for staff, and can represent the eventual social or environmental change to which your organisation *contributes*.



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How to develop 'The Situation'

The 'what then' approach

Another approach that can be used to help the group reach consensus on the longest-term impact is the "what then?" approach.

Begin by having the group write individual ideas about impact. Next, as a group, order these chronologically using the question "what then?" to guide the process. For instance, read each statement aloud to the group as a "what then?" question. Using the example on this page, the first question would be - "If young people are able to access job opportunities which were previously closed to them, what then?" - Then find the next statement in the sequence. If there are gaps, create new statements.

Once the statements are in order, continue asking "what then?" until you reach the longest term impact – you can then decide where you want to stop along the way. The statements you have mapped in sequence will constitute your long term outcomes which will be the starting point for mapping your Outcomes Pathways, which we will explore next.

You can find more information about the 'What then' approach to defining impact in the reading list with *A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning* by the Annie E.Casey Foundation